

# AFTER MAY DAY, WHAT'S NEXT FOR OCCUPY?

## Movement looks forward after mixed response to general strike

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Reporting by NSFP Staff

On the afternoon of May 1, Lang junior Lukas Walczak and a group of fellow students were marching up Sixth Avenue from Washington Square Park. They had just participated in the much-anticipated May Day Wildcat march, an assembly of protesters, many of them in "black bloc" attire, which featured frequent clashes with the police. The march evolved into a general assembly at Washington Square, where Walczak and others decided to march uptown to join the day's planned mass solidarity rally at Union Square.

It was the day of Occupy Wall Street's proposed general strike, and police sirens were blaring across Manhattan while helicopters flew overhead. Walczak, who came to Lang this semester from Bard College at Simon's Rock and has been involved in OWS since his arrival, was eager to participate in the day's activities. He was involved in organizing a student walkout at The New School with several friends, an action that involved them taking to the streets with about a dozen other students while carrying a large, colorful homemade banner that read "On Strike."

After leaving Washington Square, the Wildcat march decided to move off the sidewalk at Sixth Avenue, undaunted by the imposing NYPD presence lining the streets. But the police swooped in immediately — arresting Walczak, fellow Lang students Elliott Epstein and Ty Anania, and several other marchers. Walczak was detained for nearly 30 hours; Epstein, who had been bloodied during the altercation, was led away with a sweatshirt wrapped around his head.

For Walczak, it was a testament to the NYPD methodology, as well as an example of the department's success in studying the protests throughout the day. "They had mapped out the city very well, they knew exactly what we were doing, and they were very precisely orchestrating ways to cut our legs out from under us," he said.

May 1 was the day of the Occupy movement's emergence from an uneventful winter. The "American Fall" saw protests originate at Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan before sweeping through much of the nation and then much of the world. On the back of a platform which preached populist, anti-corporate rhetoric and utilized the politics of physical bodies occupying physical spaces,

many considered Occupy to represent the largest and most significant activist movement since the 1960s.

But with organized police crackdowns, such as the eviction of Zuccotti Park last November, the movement faced stifling opposition from law enforcement. Many encampments were taken down, and protesters faced a long winter that would be spent planning and pondering Occupy's next step. Last December, Occupy Los Angeles put out a nationwide call for a general strike on the historically significant occasion of May 1 — a day of mass mobilization that would align the movement's interests with organized labor and kickstart its return to the mainstream public consciousness.

By day's end, roughly 30,000 protesters — according to organizers' own estimates — participated in the May Day demonstrations across New York. Actions included organized labor pickets in the morning; the academic community's Free University gathering in Madison Square Park; the heated Wildcat march on the Lower East Side; the afternoon's solidarity convergence at Union Square; and a massive, permitted march from Union Square, down Broadway towards the Financial District.

Many anticipated May 1 to be day that would feature a participatory turn-out of historical proportions. Yet many

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walked away from events feeling underwhelmed and disappointed. There were no synchronized blockades of bank lobbies, bridges and lobbies, nor was there a reoccupation of Zuccotti Park or some other public space.

Jeremy Varon, a professor of history at The New School who has studied social activist movements in the United States, said May Day was hyped as "a powerful



NYPD officers waiting for protesters to leave the Vietnam Memorial Park.

HENRY MILLER

show of force that would re-energize and revitalize the [Occupy] movement within the national landscape" — something that, in Varon's estimation, "it failed to achieve."

Part of the reason was the NYPD, who showed up in full force and monitored nearly each of the day's events.

The police reported the relatively low figure of 86 arrests made throughout the day; NYPD spokesman Paul Browne told the *New York Daily News* that May 1 featured "less protesters [than in the past] and they were met by police everywhere they went."

Varon added that the NYPD's tactics on May 1 "seemed to work extremely well. There were very few incidents at the margins that would draw negative

attention to the police," such as the October 1 mass arrest on the Brooklyn Bridge that resulted in 700 Occupy Wall Street protesters detained by the NYPD.

Some protesters and activists involved in OWS, however, saw May 1 as a successful actualization of months of planning — a sign of the movement's staying power, and only the beginning of Occupy's growth.

New School for Social Research student Cecily McMillan, who was arrested at a March demonstration at Zuccotti Park and has worked with the movement since its inception, termed the day "the true starting point of our movement. Everything else was legwork."

"[May 1] was the most true realization of a movement of the 99% we have seen thus far," said McMillan, whose arrest in March drew headlines worldwide. "May Day was a show of the public we can turn out. Occupy was never asleep; we've been planning. And we continue to work." McMillan noted the congressional candidacy of George Martinez, who is running in New York's 12th District against Democrat Nydia Velazquez and has garnered support from some in the movement, as an example that Occupy is looking beyond its traditional niche and attempting to break into electoral politics.

But for others involved in the Occupy movement — for whom its message and ideals resonate, and who looked forward to May Day as an occasion to fully convey that message out in the streets en masse — May 1 left something to be desired.

"I don't think it was a victory for [the movement]," said Lukas Walczak. "It was not necessarily a defeat either, which is this awkward, neutral place to be in. The police were very effective in shutting it down, and we were not as organized in our actions as we were in the lead-up."

Varon said that Occupy would have to reevaluate its tactics and goals in order to recapture the magic of the fall.

"The genius and provocation of Occupy Wall Street was to model a kind of new form and new spirit of politics — centered on the occupation of physical space, the absence of demands, doing something other than just marching," Varon said. "What a lot of people hoped would be the inauguration of a new phase [of the movement] felt a little more like a death knell, and a challenge to regroup and try to find a way to appear relevant again."



Protesters marching down Fifth Avenue to Union Square.

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